

Aesthetic Consideration in Urhobo Pottery

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Abstract

Aesthetics is the study of beauty and taste, whether in the form of comic, tragic or the sublime. It is also a human way of interpreting the world as it existed since the dawn of human society and not even since the beginning of Western civilization. This human world view transcend in human endeavour, because the interpretation beauty depends on some principles which must be available in art work. But, for Africans art works, especially in traditional settings nobody thinks about the elements and principles of design. It is for this reason art is produced to serve this most important to producer and the consumers. Yet, the study looks at beauty that is hidden in the traditional art works produce by the Urhobo potters of Nigeria. Some pictures of Urhobo pots were made available to enable the discussion on the topic (Aesthetic Consideration in Urhobo Pottery). Literatures and oral interview were used to get information and based the findings conclusion was deduced and recommendations were also made.

Introduction

The word 'pottery' is seen as a general name for all fired clay wares. These range from valuable decorative wares to household utensils and shrine pots. Pottery extends further to include all clay wares that passed through heat treatment and glazing process. Pottery is, therefore, directly related to any process that uses silica and heat treatment to make permanent objects of usefulness from earthy materials.

The art of pots making in Nigeria received a great stimuli for development as a venture when the Abuja pottery centre was established by the government based on the advice of Michael Cardew, who conducted several researches on pottery in Nigeria. Agberia, (2005:8) confirms this when he said that first trainees of Michael Cardew in the now Ladi Kwali Pottery Centre, Abuja, were taken from the environment, among which are the women of kwali village where pot making had been the major practice, happens to be one of the first trainees of Michael Cardew. The spread of the art pot was not limited to northern part of this country alone but it spread all over the land mass called Nigeria. As the spread and the practice of art pottery emerge and continued, pots were made according to specifications as the need arises. These specifications were determined by the philosophies, values, norms and aesthetical values of the people who made the pots. Meanwhile, for an art to be valued and appreciated there is the need for the art piece to meet some required standards needed by the consumers of such an art pieces and these expectations always determine the meaningful aesthetic designs on the art works.

It was also obvious that African art existed in many forms and styles, and with fairly little influence from outside Africa. Most of the traditional forms and the aesthetic norms were handed down orally as well as written, Diakparomre (2004). Visual and performance art are prominent, and partially abstracted forms were valued long before influence from the Western tradition began in earnest. The Nok and other African cultures are testimony to this.

The elements of the earth form; Organic pigments, fluids, and the elemental matter of life are such as are used by Africans to aesthetically transformed onto the objects and the very forces of the natural world imbue the objects with the primal energies of African life. The picture of the pot beneath is an example of one of objects gotten from earth which been patterned according to African understanding of word aesthetics.

Art and life



Urhobo People and Beliefs

The people of Urhobo as noted by Nabofa (2004:37) claims that in the pre-colonial times, they were part of a fragmented society of smaller communities. These communities were led by their elders, but virtually, all of their inhabitants were regarded as equals; there were no servants and no masters. Individuals respected their parents and elders on the grounds of age. The spiritual world was believed to follow the same arrangement, as individuals of equal status, inhabited the physical world. They believed that individual spirits of equal status occupied the spiritual world. At the same time, they believed that the Supreme Being, is called “Oghene,” who governs and controls both spheres of existence.

At one time, it is believed the only spiritual being that the Urhobo worshipped was “Oghene” he continued But, expansionist drives and struggles over territorial boundaries led to conflicts, shrines were set up for war charms, for the preparation of herbs and other medicines’ which were also prepared to enhance fertility in plants and animals. These shrines gradually became places of regular worship. For example, Abamwa (2001:54), states that “Orise” is a shrine stand that consists of table-like structure called Agbada, where yam peels are kept. A bamboo stick (Ukpoho) is planted by the side of the Agbada and at the extreme top of the bamboo stick is a miniature fish trap call ‘Uge’ in Urhobo language tied onto it. Also, pieces of white and red cloth are tied on a side of the fish-trap to signify the presence of the supernatural being. It is at this stand that traditional religious men or women go to every time they want to make a request to God. They also believe that the fish-trap helps to retain answers to request they earlier made. It is from the fish-trap that each of the answers begins to come out and fulfill the purposes for the request. These and many others that would be explained later in the course of this paper that may look stupid but these are the rooting where the Urhobo people draw their aesthetic influences even on pottery.

In the process of worshipping of this Supreme Being through the intermediaries that one may refer to as the spirits that control the shrines and which the art pieces represent in form of mediums. These art works spread and cut across painting, sculptural, and pottery pieces. However, for these art pieces to be able serve purpose they intended to serve the culture setting there is the need for cultural standardize principle that the art works must possesses. Meanwhile, these are not the rudiments of judging an art piece in regards the Western World acceptable criteria. With happening, the Western World regarded this style of art production as being timid and useless yet, under minding the coded aesthetical value that hidden in the art pieces. But, pieces satisfied the reason for creation. It is also important to insist that although the pieces were able the purpose why they were made they still portray aesthetics as considered in the African context that is now appreciated even by those condemned them and all over the continents of the world today. This paper therefore identified and documented some of the aesthetical values in pottery, using Urhobo cultural pots as a case study. The method used was mainly written evidence, oral interview.

The Urhobo Pottery and Aesthetical Value

The pottery tradition is not predominant in all the parts of Urhoboland, however, the people are known for this artery to great extent in this country. The writings of Li Rose” “and Oyelola”“on Urhobo pottery have this testimony. There are different types of pots been produced by the people of Urhobo. The pot ranges from storage, cooking to sacrificial utensils. Their production techniques, sizes, functions and aesthetics also differs. However, it important to note that it seems that the aesthetical value of the pots as interleaved either in forms or in

decorations on the pots produced have not yet been analyzed and documented. This paper therefore looked at this aspect that is lacking in the art of pots making amongst the Urhobo people of Delta State.

The decoration patterns normally found on this pot have not changed tremendously, especially, on the body of the pots. These decorations are the decoration methods fall within the ones enumerated by Peter, (1988:16). These are includes sgraffitto, piercing, stamping, and painting. The sgraffitto deco drawn on the body of the pots do not signified just geometric shapes but they connote meaningful meaning(s) according Urhobo peoples' belief Though, few of such decorations could be just for fancy but in few cases. This method of design known as sgraffitto is locally employed in form of planned lines scratches on pot as seen in fig. 1

Fig 1



This pot is called “Oche” in many parts of Urhoboland exception of few Urhobo clans like Okpe and Uwie where different dialects apart Urhobo is being spoken. The pot is called ‘Erhie’ among by “Okpes”, and it called “Efre” amongst the Uwie people. Its function is similar among the Urhobo communities. This pot serves as a container, which could be used to store things like liquid, grains and concoctions. In addition, traditional religion worshippers use it to cook concoctions that are to be used for spiritual purposes.

The “Oche” pots are produced with a big oval shaped belly with a sitting curve that enable the pot to sit when not assisted or supported by anything. Usually, “Oche” pot use to have a narrow neck that helps to project the beauty of showing roundness of the body that runs from the base right the neck region of the “Oche” pot and wide open mouth to enable liquid content to be poured in and removed easily. The method of decoration varies from stamping (“Evwi rho phiyo”), painting (“Eda rho”), piercing (“Erha rho”), impressed (“yen”) to sgraffitto (“Eka rho”). In the traditional centers sgraffitto decoration method is referred to as scratching method. For this method, the decorative lines either run from the top to the bottom of the “Oche” pot, or sometimes across each other at intervals making them look unplanned. Although, the lines look unplanned and timid, yet, the roughness and networking of the lines still make the designs look unique and also exposes personal expression.

Fig. 2



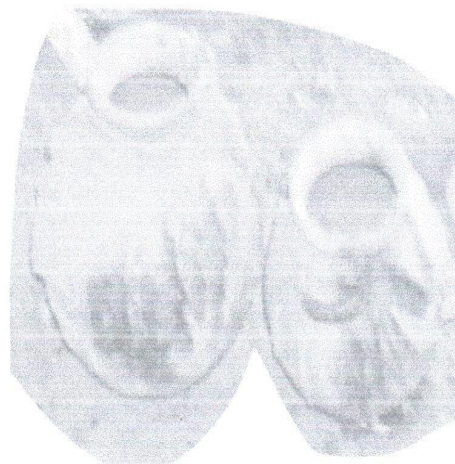
“Oche rha awo yore Idodo”



“Oche rha awo yore Idodc

This second pot has the normal shape of “Oche” but it is built half way to the top, the reason for this is because of the purpose the pot made to serve. The halfway built “Oche” is being used as a flower planter while smaller ones of the same built serve as flower vases. The rim that ends the mouth of the half way looks more of the Ibinis’ style. The rim is considerable wide and well position as it slopes outward around the mouth. As a matter of fact, this is one of the newness innovations the Urhobo traditional potters are entering into.

Fig 3



“Oche re Ekpofia”-(Pot for cooking of the concoction).

These pots, from the deco they carry show that these pots are made and proposed for driving away evil spirits that have taken possession of somebody such as knitting the spirit, soul, or the body of the individual together with evil spirit. In an interview held with Papa Mereje Laurence, he confirms that when crawling creatures like insecticide, scorpion, and snake as found in the deco happens to bite somebody. It is that this pot should be used for cooking of the concoction that would use to cure or prevent such unpleasant incident.

There is another type of this pot having the same shape of “Oche” but smaller in size. It is called “Omo-Oche” (Smaller Pot) in many parts of Urhobo but it is called “Abara” among the Okpe people and “Obote tete” by the Uvwie people. The pot is used for fetching water from wells and it can also be used as a container for content of sacrifice. The word sacrifice is referred to in Urhobo general dialect as “Izobo,” meaning that its content helps to avert or appease a deity that might be responsible for certain misfortunes that could come as a result of offence (s).

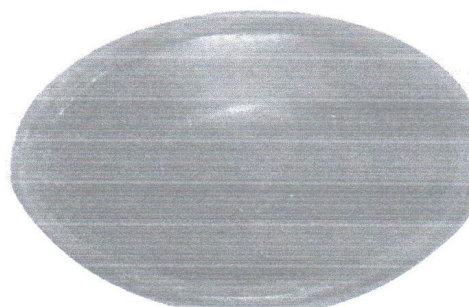
Fig 4



“Ewwere rho-tete rha je emu phiyo”.

This “Ewwere rhotete rha je emu phiyo” is the smaller type of the one that is immediately beneath this very one and it a pot that serves the sole purpose of sewing food for individuals. The form and decorations are so captivating, the ending rim to mouth impressed design were used as part of the form. Also, sgraffitto are used to create lines running from the center of base to the neck of the pot where the rim is resting on.

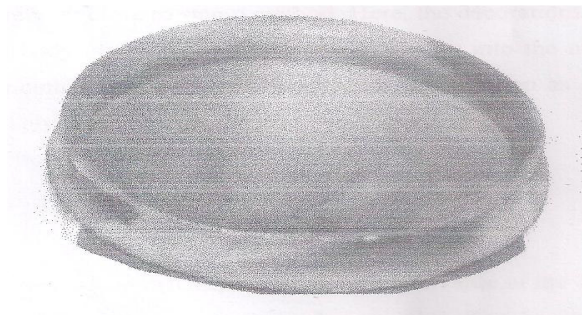
Fig. 5



“Ewwere rhode rhaje emu phiyo”.

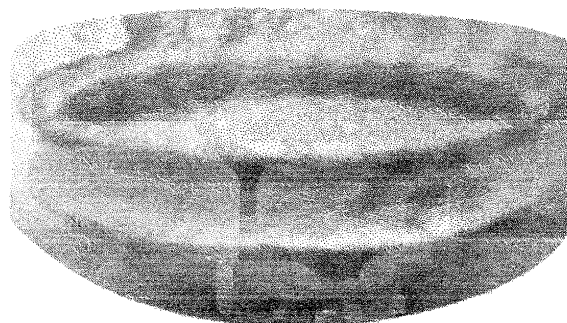
The “Ewwere rho Ode rha je emu phiyo” is a small pot “Okanoghwe” amongst the Okpes and” Efre tete” by the Uwie people. It is mainly for sewing soup and it also potted into different sizes. So, the choice of usage depends on the size of the content the users want to put in it. It is modelled having a rim that placed in way it can easily be carried even if it hot it can be carried. The pot in figure 3 has some depressions all around the rim that ends the mouth. These depressions create a kind of beauty that is so unique and also facilitating its appreciation. For figure 4, the pot also serves the same purpose but forms of decoration are quite different from the ones in the first serving pot. Here, scratches referred to as sgraffito are done within the rim of the serving pot (“Ewwere rhode rha je emu phiyo”). The decorations are inserted in continuous round circle around the rim of the serving pot. Nevertheless, traditional religion practitioners use it for “Izobo” (sacrificial pot), the content are usually placed and found within three junctions. Sometimes the content entails cooked food but, hardly the content is found with raw food. The shapes of potting the “Ewwere rhode rha je emu phiyo” also differ from one representation to another. Some of the mouths are concave while others are convex.

Fig. 6



“Ewwere rhode re awo djere emu” (Cooking Pot).

Fig. 7



“Ewwere rhode re awo djere emu” (Cooking Pot).

This is another type of pot, it is used for cooking soup the “Ewwere rhode re awo djere emu” that its content can last for few days depending on number of people the soup is prepared for. It is called “Egbeago” by the Okpe people and Uvwie calls it “Efre kporo”. In religious practices, the “Ewwere rhode re awo djere emu” is used as container for cooking concoction for self defence in the time of war or festival and they are popularly referred to in central Urhobo language as “Ekpofla”. The designs for deco differ from one to another, see fig. 6 and 7. The decorations in flg.6 show sgrafflto lines running from the center of the base of the pot to end side of the base of the pot.

While for figure 7, the shows the outer part of the pot “Ewwere rhode re awo djere emu” shows decorations that are very close to stamp method. Here, the decorations are running within the projected part of the body of the pot and where it is ending into the neck and the mouth region. The rim at the mouth is modeled in a way that it has flat flap as an ending rim that stretches outwardly and it gives room to enable convenient carrying.

Conclusion

The study was carried out on discussion of the aesthetic value of the Urhobo pots. It also discusses the uniqueness of the pots regards to aesthetics value. The findings showed that the decorations and forms the pots were in accordance to purpose the pots are made to serve, which is consumers’ wish. The purposes of pots cannot also be divorced from the way of life of the people. It is salient to note that the life of a people cannot be separated from their beliefs which connote the norms, beliefs, values which be expressed in their art. Anything that has value in one’s life means it some that needed to be appreciated. The methods and the value attached to

the forms and decorations which are deduced from the belief of the call for notification of aesthetic value the pots.

From this study it was noted that aesthetics of the Urhobo pots aesthetics cannot be detached from the functionality of art pieces (pots). This therefore, recommends that people should learn to appreciate their culture more because it exposes to your heart that which you really are. Also, every individual should see themselves as an entity and embodiment of knowledge through which ideas flow. This should better encourage us to look beyond the physical interpretation of art works production but see aesthetical values that are enclosed in them.

NOTES

Papa John Oniovosa, 73 years old.
Papa Lawrence Iwe, 76years old.
Madam Alice Ighorodje, 70years old.
Madam Esther Uti, 67years old.
Mr. Ezekiel Awhie, 58years old.
Mrs. Oyiborode Juliet, 47years old,

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